

LIMINAL FABRIC

Byzantine and Early Islamic Furnishing Textiles

2015 DUMBARTON OAKS MUSEUM CONFERENCE



Detail of Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos, ca. 6th century; tapestry weave in polychrome wool, 114.5 × 138 cm. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1929.1. Artwork in the public domain; photograph © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC.

Introduction

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Although textiles represent a substantial proportion of the Byzantine Collection at Dumbarton Oaks, until recent years they were known mainly to scholars and specialists. A major aim of a research project launched in 2012 was to publish the collection in an online platform accompanied by scholarly essays (www.doaks.org/resources/textiles). Just like examples in many other museums holding such fabrics, Dumbarton Oaks' pieces date to the fourth through twelfth centuries, and most compare in technique and design to finds from Egypt. Sometimes called "Coptic" in scholarship, the pieces were not solely made or used by Coptic Christians; their imagery is usually not explicitly religious, and, because of their secondary or even tertiary uses as burial shrouds, it is not always clear who in fact commissioned, wove, and used the pieces that survive today.

Furnishing textiles quickly became a focus of attention for the project, in large part because some of the most stunning examples of textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum could be identified as hangings. And yet such fabrics present their own particular challenges to research. Although we can study surviving textiles in museum collections, read about their uses in texts, and explore the physical spaces where they were once used, no textiles survive in their architectural settings to provide data about their functions—and many survive only as fragments that themselves must be pieced together before coming to any conclusions about their use.

In 2015, Dumbarton Oaks hosted a conference with the goal of exploring furnishing textiles in the late antique, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods. The essays here were presented at that event, and all address the context and uses of furnishing textiles during these periods.

The essays in this volume cross many temporal and geographic areas. They are connected through a focus both on the textiles' contexts in the built environment and on the human beings who gathered in houses and other buildings. The authors ground their discussions in material culture approaches and seek to explain evidence for furnishing textiles holistically instead of in isolation. Underlying all these essays is the idea that textiles participated actively in shaping interior and exterior space, whether in the context of firmly and permanently erected structures or in ephemeral buildings, despite the lack of in situ evidence.

Maria Parani raises questions about the relationship of texts, objects, and representations as she probes the varied sources for Byzantine curtains. Kostis Kourelis surveys archaeological evidence of cloth production, shedding important light on the raw materials used to make fabrics and the relationship of production to landscape and community.

Evidence for the uses of furnishing textiles and close study of individual fabrics appear as themes in Eunice Dauterman Maguire's essay on curtains and Kathrin Colburn's study of an exquisitely preserved hanging from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sabine

Schrenk's reading of Dumbarton Oaks' Hestia Polyolbos hanging pursues the cultural context of furnishing textiles through a focus on iconographical themes, and Jennifer Ball turns to the imagery on a large fragment in the collection to situate it in an early Islamic milieu.

The essays also look beyond attribution and function to the ways that textiles carried other meanings in medieval society. Thelma K. Thomas uses late antique representations of the Desert Fathers to examine how textiles could carry individual and social memories across time; Maria Evangelatou, similarly, writes about the metaphorical and profoundly spiritual associations of cloth in her reading of background textiles in the Chora Monastery frescoes. Avinoam Shalem's essay

on a unique surviving red silk held in Split opens up questions about the associative meanings of cloth in the early Islamic era, while Elizabeth Dospěl Williams evaluates the movement of silk motifs through different media in this same period.

Taken together, then, the essays prompt new ways of thinking about the relationships of textual sources, museum objects, archaeological remains, and architectural settings. Each essay engages with categories of evidence that at times do not fit together neatly or easily. As a whole, they challenge us to consider the disjuncture between these categories of knowledge, and the impossible gap between what we can document objectively and what we can only conjure in our imaginations.